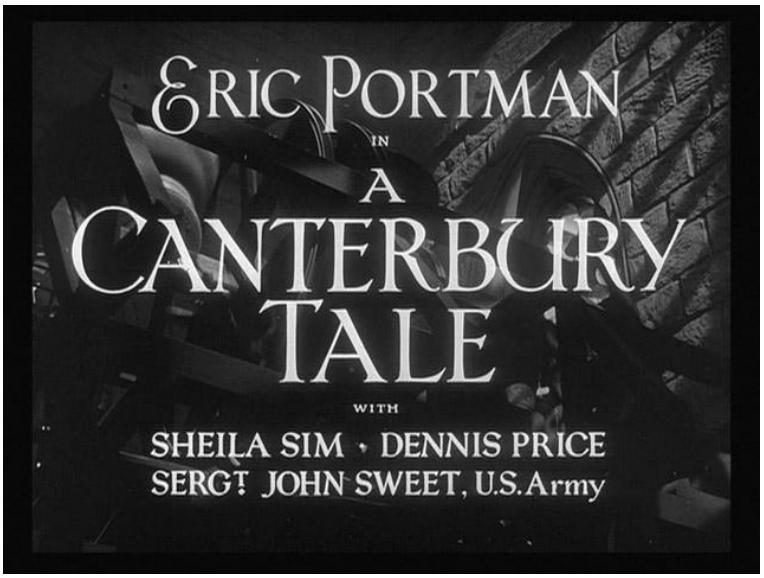
A Canterbury Tale of Town and Country Folk

by Tom Ruffles

The first version of this essay was written in 2004 as a result of a call for papers by *Screen* magazine for an issue to celebrate the centenary of the birth of Michael Powell the following year. This appeared as Volume 46, Number 1, Spring 2005. My effort was not accepted and I have revised it extensively since then.



Chillingbourne – Heaven on Earth?

A Canterbury Tale (1944), the story of a brief encounter between three outsiders, Alison (a Land Army girl), Peter and Bob (British and US army sergeants reseptively), with the inhabitants of the village of Chillingbourne – symbolised by their Justice of the Peace Thomas Colpeper – had an intense personal significance for Man of Kent Michael Powell. It is the first of his films he mentions in his autobiography *A Life in Movies*[1], and on page fifty he is exclaiming how extraordinary it is that it keeps cropping up. Yet in the second volume of his memoirs he ruefully concludes that he had expected it to be "a far more personal film than it turned out to

[1] Michael Powell, *A Life in Movies: An Autobiography*, Faber and Faber, London, 2000, p.21 (first published 1986).

be."[2] He had assumed beforehand that he knew the area so well from his childhood that he would be able to convey its atmosphere on screen. He concludes, however, that he had failed, mainly because his principal actors were strangers to the area. He contrasts them unfavourably with those in *Gone to Earth* (1950), whom he considers to have been more rooted in the Shropshire/Worcestershire countryside in which that film is set. Whatever his reservations, however, he also claimed that *A Canterbury Tale* contained some of his favourite sequences.[3]

The critical concerns with the film, though, go deeper than the characters' lack of rootedness in the area. The film may have been part of a "crusade against materialism", as Powell declared,[4] but the characterisation of *A Canterbury Tale* in the *Monthly Film Bulletin*'s review as a "marriage of novelette and philosophy" suggests a lack of focus and an uncertainty of tone which offset the lyrical with episodes that are often either sinister or comic.[5] The uncertainty, accounting for certain reservations among its early critics, enriches the film but undermines what many have regarded as its core conservative values. Hinting at this confusion, Kevin Macdonald's view of *A Canterbury Tale* is that it, along with *I Know Where I'm Going!* (1945), reinforces the status quo, yet at the same time celebrates "the oddities, the irrationalities, the mysteries of British life."[6] These are very different things, and the latter collectively subvert the status quo.

[2] Michael Powell, *Million Dollar Movie: The Second Volume of His Life in Movies*, Heinemman, London, 1992, p.67.
[3] Ian Christie (ed.), *Powell, Pressburger and Others*, BFI, London, 1978, p.33.
[4] Jeffrey Richards and Anthony Aldgate, *Best of British: Cinema and Society 1930-1970*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1983, p.46, citing the *Arena* interview Powell gave to Gavin Millar in 1981. Macdonald claims the phrase for Pressburger (Macdonald, 1994, p.233), as does Moor (2005, p.93).
[5] K. F. B., 'Monthly Film Bulletin', Vol. 11, No. 126, 30 June 1944, p.67.
[6] Kevin Macdonald, *Emeric Pressburger: The life and Death of a Screenwriter*, Faber and Faber, London, 1994, p.233.

James Chapman summarises an orthodox view of *A Canterbury Tale* when he writes, "the plot involving the uncovering of the 'glueman's' identity is less important than the pastoral imagery and the mystical attachment to the countryside which pervades the film."[7] Similarly, Nanette Aldred describes it as "a pastoral poem to the Kent countryside."[8] Andrew Moor links *A Canterbury* Tale with *I Know Where I'm Going!* in a chapter as *Two Pastorals*.[9] He contrasts one myth which he feels the film champions – the cohesive, harmonious rural community – resisting another evoked by urbanisation, that of the atomised community of individuals who happen to share space but not cohesion.[10] Jeffrey Richards and Anthony Aldgate characterise Powell as standing on the "Romantic Right", as opposed to Humphrey Jennings on the "Romantic Left".[11] In these characterisations, the countryside is portrayed positively in the film, the city by implication negatively, and it is assumed that Powell shared these values uncritically.

On the contrary, I would argue that Powell's attitude to the countryside is ambivalent, and the film encapsulates tensions between town and country that had existed for as long as the Industrial Revolution, but which had been sharpened in the inter-war years by the increase in road traffic and urban sprawl.[12] The introduction to an article by Hilaire Belloc on 'The Pilgrim's Way' in 1935 notes that the accompanying photographs show that "the countryside through which it passes has not yet been entirely despoiled by the ravages of unplanned 'development'."[13] A mystical attachment *does* exist in *A Canterbury Tale*, but to concentrate on it exclusively provides an unbalanced reading of the film. Powell and Pressburger's 1944 evocation of the spirit of Chaucer is not the unalloyed paean of praise to the countryside that it is generally considered to be, and the 'novelette' plot and attractiveness of the photography deflect attention from the complexity of the view of England that the film articulates.[14] Army manoeuvres churn up the landscape, frighten the horses, and perhaps damage archaeological

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[7] James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda, 1939-1945*, I. B. Tauris, London, 1998, p.241.

[8] Nanette Aldred, 'A Canterbury Tale: Powell and Pressburger's Film Fantasies of Britain', p.118, in David Mellor (ed.), *A Paradise Lost: The Neo-Romantic Imagination in Britain 1935-55*, Lund Humphries/Barbican Art Gallery, London, 1987.

[9] Andrew Moor, *Powell and Pressburger: A Cinema of Magic Spaces*, I B Tauris, London, 2005, pp.85-125.

[10] ibid., 2005, p.95.

[11] Richards and Aldgate, 1983, p.46. Ian Christie also sees the film as standing on the Romantic Right, or as an expression of "Neo-Romanticism": Ian Christie, '"History is Now and England": *A Canterbury Tale* in its Contexts', in Christie and Andrew Moor (eds.), *The Cinema of Michael Powell: International Perspectives on an English Film-Maker*, BFI, London, 2005, pp.75-93.

[12] Moor refers to the increase in traffic into the countryside, referring to "secular pilgrimages in search of 'Old England'", 2005, p.92.

[13] Hilaire Belloc, 'The Pilgrim's Way', *The Geographical Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 6, October 1935, p.421. The photographs, taken near the Way between Winchester and Canterbury by W E Lake, Will F Taylor and Herbert Felton, could have been stills from the film.

[14] Steve Jones also feels that the representation of landscapes in the late 1930s and 1940s was more nuanced than standard analyses of pictorialism suggest, and that *A Canterbury Tale* demonstrates a 'leakiness' of the hegemonic order: Steve Jones, 'Caravans and Slide Shows: Rural Modernism in *A Canterbury Tale*', *Rural History*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2001, pp.211-227.

remains, but the suggestion is that it is a necessary evil when the alternative – occupation – would be far worse.

Having grown up on a farm, Powell was conscious of the underbelly of rural life. In *Edge of the World* (1937), for example, Peter Manson is so unsentimental he is prepared to kill his dog without a second thought. Powell must certainly have been aware of the conditions endured by hop-pickers before mechanisation, as his father had grown hops before the First World War. George Orwell's account of a stint he undertook in 1931 describes the exploitation, with wages barely sufficient to pay for food and the fare home.[15] Tending the Garden of England can be back-breaking work. While these negative aspects are submerged, the bucolic atmosphere in *A Canterbury Tale* is balanced by a down-to-earth view of the necessity for change. After all, *Edge of the World* is about an ossified society that cannot retain its young population and is sustained by a religious faith comprising rhetoric judged more by length than quality.

An element easily forgotten by concentrating on Powell's return to his native county, a more general issue with their collaboration, is Emeric Pressburger's contribution. Macdonald makes a case for *A Canterbury Tale* as a reflection of Pressburger's "idyllic rural childhood" and appreciation of the "continuity and values of rustic life". [16] In which case, Bob, the stranger initially ill at ease in a foreign land, could stand in for Pressburger the émigré finding his way among an alien people by seeing their commonalities. Pressburger, who was prevented from entering Kent during filming by the refusal of the Chief Constable to grant him a permit,[17] makes an implicit link between the way strangers are treated in Chillingbourne and the way the

[15] *George Orwell in Kent: Hop Picking*, Bridge Books, Wateringbury, Kent, 1970, experiences also used in *A Clergyman's Daughter* (Victor Gollancz, London, 1935).
[16] Macdonald, 1994, p.8.
[17] ibid., p.239.

populace were dealt with by the authorities in occupied Europe.[18] Macdonald's portrayal of Pressburger out-Powell's the standard image of Powell: Pressburger's "vision was basically old-fashioned Anglican Tory: a belief in the wisdom and beauty to be found in continuity and tradition."[19] This complements Graham Fuller's conclusion that the film is "a High Tory lesson in cultural conservationism."[20] But it is only half the story.

Thomas Colpeper – Custodian of rural values

Feudal squire Colpeper (played by Eric Portman) is the key figure around whom such narrative as there is revolves, and an examination of his beliefs is crucial to an assessment of the film's dissection of the benefits or otherwise of country living. John Russell Taylor sees a concern in Powell's oeuvre with the tension between opposite modes, those of self-indulgence and self-sacrifice, a disciplining of the surface with "dark forces" still evident beneath.[21] In *A Canterbury Tale* the weight is towards mystical forces, but the mysticism has an unprepossessing side. Colpeper may or may not be redeemed by the purity of his motivation, but with the sexual connotations of sticky fluids, his is the terror that comes in the night.[22] Colpeper is marking his territory, and by ordering that strangers report to the town hall, he is ensuring that they know it is his territory.[23] Glue violates the women's bodies; if its adhesive properties were any stronger, the victims would have been obliged to shave their heads, anticipating treatment meted out to collaborative women in liberated France in the year of the film's release. For Colpeper too, failure to conform to his standards necessitates humiliation, and his strategy of marking the body is designed to indicate the bearer's status as seductress of the proper manly pursuit of local history. Douglas McVay is wrong to suggest that the glue is symbolic of Colpeper's "desire to pour knowledge of England's heritage into the apparently unreceptive brains of local girls", because they are the very ones who are normally excluded, as is pointed out by the incomer, Alison.[24]

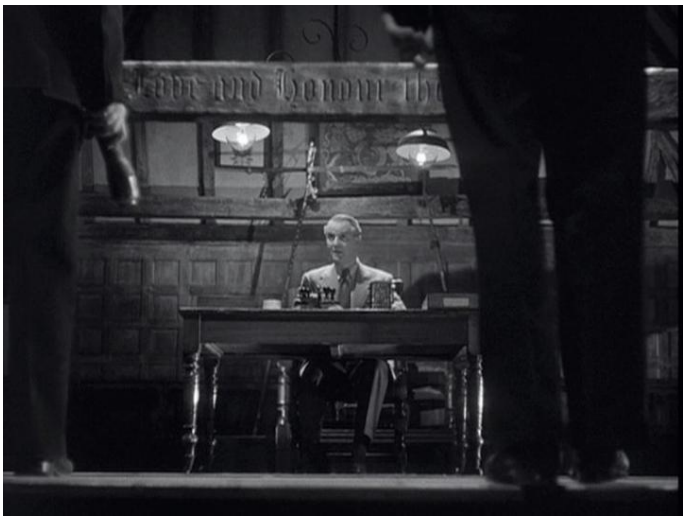
[18] Bureaucracy was to be a major theme of *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946). Moor describes "Chilling-bourne" as a "cold domain", as the name suggests: Moor, 2005, pp.96-7. Cawkwell, 'A Cathedral Tale'. *Theology*, Vol. 111, No. 863, 2008, p.376, fn8, points out that Pressburger's exclusion gives Colpeper's claim that the Kent constabulary is an "excellent police force" an added irony.
[19] Macdonald, 1994., pp.233-4.
[20] Graham Fuller, 'A Canterbury Tale', *Film Comment*, Vol.31, No.2, March/April 1995, p.34.
[21] John Russell Taylor, 'Myths and Supermen, *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 47, Autumn 1978, p.229.
[22] Sue Harper also draws the link between the glue and semen: Picturing the Past: The Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film, BFI, London, 1994, p.106; and Tison Pugh notes the "allegorized sexuality" of "oozy liquids" in a "perplexing mix of pastoralism and perversity": Pugh, 'Perverse Pastoralism and Medieval Melancholia in Powell and Pressburger's *A Canterbury Tale*', *Arthuriana* Vol. 19, No. 3, 2009, p.97.
[23] Christie, 2005, p.85, notes the absence of a castle or large manor house, as could be found in the real-life locations used as models for the buildings in Chillingbourne. This lack, he suggests, makes Chillingbourne "less feudal and more democratic", but despite possessing a relatively modest dwelling, Colpeper's authority is still complete.
[24] Douglas McVay, 'Michael Powell: Three Neglected Films', *Films and Filming*, No.328, January 1982.

C A Lejeune refers to Colpeper as a "mystagogue", and there is definitely an element of the demagogue about him.[25] As for the "mysta-" element, Richards and Aldgate compare him to Prospero, and he is often cast by commentators as a puckish spirit.[26] The mise-en-scène seduces the viewer into wanting him to be justified, to view Britain's countryside as an organic paradise. Alison says he looks "so right" when scything his grass, but his conception of the link to the past is kindred to that of "Merrie England" in *Lucky Jim* (John Boulting, 1957), both extolling the virtues of a past that never was, a concept ripe for satire by the more open mid-1950s but a key element of wartime propaganda a decade earlier.[27] Fuller claims Colpeper emerges "as a beneficent magus, an agent of divine blessings", and refers to the "pantheistic mysticism of the English countryside," but the mystical streak is in tension with Powell's urban rationalism. [28]

From the beginning, there is something sinister about Colpeper. The first view (discounting him running along a street after pouring glue in Alison's hair) is up a flight of stairs, with a bar across the top bearing the injunction "Love and honour the truth," an injunction marking him out as a hypocrite as well as misogynist, given his simultaneous positions as Glueman and JP. He has something of the steely qualities of Portman's U-Boat commander in *49th Parallel* (1941), despite the press book's hopeful description of him as "a man of kindly nature." The film's first critics focused on Colpeper's unorthodox activities and what they might symbolise. Lilian Duff in *The Sunday Graphic*, in answer to the question "What will Americans actually learn about Britain?" replies, along with a comment about the scenery and architecture being lovely, that

[25] C. A. Lejeune, *Chestnuts in Her Lap: 1936-1946*, Phoenix House, London, 1947, p.121.
[26] For example by Richards and Aldgate, 1983, p.47; Moor, 2005, p.98.
[27] Christie, 2005, p.88, also draws attention to the ways in which the film "probed the very values that underlay the wartime appeal to a timeless England symbolised by the 'garden of Kent'", and their applicability to townsfolk.
[28] Fuller, 1995, p.33. Robert Murphy also categorises Colpeper as a magus: Robert Murphy, 'Strong Men: Three Forms of the Magus in the Films of Powell and Pressburger', *Screen*, Vol. 46, No. 1, Spring 2005. Colpeper is considered on pp.65-7. The other two are Dr Reeves in *A Matter of Life and Death* and Lermontov in *The Red Shoes*.

"magistrates are liable to mild forms of perversion". [29] Winifred Horrabin in *Tribune* playfully refers to J Arthur Rank's Eagle-Lion Company's "pristine purity", not realising what psychology "has discovered about the symptoms of sexual repression in magistrates!"[30] Basil Wright's later conclusion that this is "the kinkiest film of the war" is fair, though characterising Colpeper's acts as "psychotic excesses" is going too far.[31] But as William Whitebait puts it, "I doubt if the mystery about *him* is ever quite cleared up." [32]



Taylor, drawing parallels between Powell and Nietzsche, refers to Colpeper as "petty dictator of the area."[33] He seems to know everybody's business, and as Bob discovers on finding a boy on top of a hay wagon outside his window at the gruesomely-named *The Hand of Glory*, surveillance can even follow you into the bedroom. The JP's antidemocratic approach goes beyond the emergency powers which accrue to the state in wartime. He has inaugurated, both as legislator and arbiter, a kind of 'Defence of Chillingbourne Act' with no right of appeal, as Alison discovers. Macdonald feels that here, as often also in the works of G. K. Chesterton, good and evil are mistaken for each other.[34] If by this he is saying that what Colpeper does may seem superficially wrong but because his motives are good so are his actions, the ends justifying the means (a view rejected in 1943's *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*), then he is ignoring the paternalist element – Colpeper knows what is best for his subjects. When explaining his motives, he uses the analogy of a parent forcing a child to go to school even if it does not want

[29] Lilian Duff, *The Sunday Graphic*, 14 May 1944.
[30] Winifred Horrabin, *Tribune*, 20 May 1944.
[31] Basil Wright, *The Long View*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1974, p.197.
[32] William Whitebait [George Stonier], *New Statesman and Nation*, 13 May 1944. This would appear to be a sly dig at Colpeper's possible homosexuality (a middle-aged man living with his mother is clearly seen as problematic), which has been hinted at by a number of commentators. In particular, Pugh sees his sadistic actions towards women as a way of maintaining a "boys' only club" (Pugh, 2009, p.108), while recognising (p.109) that a reading of Colpeper as a latent homosexual does not do justice to his complexity.
[33] Taylor, 1978, p.227.
[34] Macdonald, 1994, p.237.

to, because it is for its own good. Colpeper's self-righteousness is attested to when in the train to Canterbury he remarks that "there are higher courts than the local bench of magistrates", while gazing at the cathedral, thereby asserting a superior morality for his glueish activities. However, as Tison Pugh indicates, associated as he is with perversity, Colpeper's particular legal interpretations become suspect.[35]

Ill-treated Alison, from the town but with sympathy for the countryside, is the instrument of Colpeper's partial humanisation. We first see her silhouetted in a doorway at the station, smoking. When station master Thomas Duckett commands that Peter and Bob accompany her to the town hall because of Mr Colpeper's orders, there is a pause while she treads her butt out, suggesting confidence and self-possession. The Glueman has misjudged her character: she does not yet know the danger of being out in the company of soldiers, and Duckett does not enlighten her. Colpeper's regulation is the very one that causes the problem and results in his unmasking. Scott Salwolke is incorrect to say that having an escort is justified because the Glueman is abroad – it is the cause of Alison's discomfort. [36]

Despite her poor start in Chillingbourne, and his refusal to employ her on his farm, a budding romance between Alison and Colpeper is suggested. Seeing Colpeper's house, and not realising he lives there, she says "what wouldn't I give to grow old in a place like that." At the lecture they are united by the chiaroscuro, which represents their shared love of the past, but hints at more. When they lie down in the grass on the Downs in order to remain hidden from Bob and Peter, they act as lovers might (a spell broken when Bob and Peter inadvertently let Colpeper know that are they are all, including Alison, aware that he is the Glueman).[37] Standing in the

[35] Pugh, 2009, p.107.
[36] Scott Salwolke, *The Films of Michael Powell and the Archers*, Scarecrow Press, Lanham, Maryland, 1977, p.112.
[37] Christie, 2005, p.79, and Pugh, 2009, pp.108-9, refer to the implicit attraction between the two in this scene, reinforced by camera angles, and Christie notes the linkage caused by the close-ups of their eyes at the lecture.

garage with Alison and her moth-eaten caravan, he looks as if he is on the point of declaring himself to her, but exits alone when her fiancé's father arrives with the news that his son is alive. Colpeper is then shown excluded from contact in the cathedral, Alison walking past without even noticing him. When she had thought that her fiancé was dead, he had said that "life is full of disappointments", clearly including himself in his estimate. If that was an attempt at consolation it was a blunt and inadequate one, but indicates that even for Colpeper, rural living can be less than totally fulfilling. In the event Alison's gain is perhaps his loss, and he is the one left disappointed. Significantly, he is the only person not to receive a blessing at Canterbury: "Only the lonely squire, who proves to be the puritanically minded Glueman, receives no blessing. He has tried to play God, and the part of God is a lonely one."[38]

Those who assume that Colpeper is penitent do not advance any evidence for the view.[39] Merely entering the cathedral is not sufficient proof. He is simply let off the hook by his interlocutors, apart from Peter, who is then sidetracked by the opportunity to play the organ. Colpeper has pleaded a higher cause, and still feels justified in his actions. Alison may have modified his views, that women are worthy to be invited to his lectures after all, and the penultimate shot of the film shows couples entering the hall together, presumably to hear one, but surely to allow them to participate would be to risk a reversion to the original situation of indifference to his message, soldiers and local women more absorbed in each other than in what he has to say. He could only be sure of success in his goal by continuing his reign of terror (though he admits that his confidence in the efficiency of the Kent Constabulary is such that he expected the Glueman to be caught eventually). These issues are left hanging as the visitors switch their attention from Chillingbourne to their various futures.

Colpeper's scene with Alison on the Downs echoes the one Portman played with Anne Crawford near the end of *Millions Like Us* (1943), in which his gruff foreman shows, reluctantly, a romantic side.

[38] Powell, 2000, p.448. Quoted by Jones, 2001, p.213, and Tim Cawkwell, 2008, pp.371-2.

[39] For example Chris Wicking, 'Retrospective: *A Canterbury Tale*', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, Vol. 51, November 1984, pp355-6; Andrew Moor, 2005, p.88; Pugh, 2009, p.111.

Powell and Pressburger's characterisation of Colpeper seems to be ironic, and the debates about the shape of post-war Britain should take which were occurring in the last three years of war would have considered him to be yesterday's man. His own characterisation of himself as the repository for English values raises the question of whether these are values, given the narrowness of his social perspective, to which the average viewer would want to subscribe. His backward-looking stance would not be thought helpful in the very different world that brought the Labour Party to power in 1945.[40]

Town and country

The six-hundred year jump from knight to soldier hints at genetic continuity in rural areas, and accompanying these stable genes, it is implied, are likely to be stable traditions and a mystic folk-wisdom that the town cannot supply. The existence of the Colpeper Institute, dating from 1886, symbolises Colpeper's roots and status in the community. He provides a counterbalance, along with the other locals, to the dislocation of war, but traditions have to mean something, have some relevance to the present, or they are only of antiquarian interest at best, and are stultifying at worst. Perhaps Powell is suggesting that the village idiot, who causes discomfort to the viewer, can be seen as the downside of population stability.[41] The modern soldier may be the descendant of the mediaeval knight, but the cost of tradition can be inbreeding and stagnation.[42]

[40] Balancing this apparent reactionary position, Christie, 2005, pp.86-7, examines the books on display in Colpeper's study, and suggests that his interest in farming methods is progressive. Ultimately, though, Christie concludes (p.90) that the film's message for its first viewers, if it had one, "was perhaps that those with a messianic belief in what is best for others should be resisted..." Jones on the other hand, indicates that G M Graham's *Soil and Sense*, which is on display, takes an anti-city, reactionary stance against modernity, harking back to a pre-industrial state, and that there was an overlap between the organic movement and a right-wing 'blood and soil' ethos (Jones, 2001, pp.214-5).

[41] McVay, 1982, p19, notes the sadistic element to this depiction.

[42] The lack of variability is also hinted at in the sharing by Duckett and Colpeper of the name Thomas.

The jarring depiction of the idiot causes Moor difficulties, with its evidence of "metropolitan superiority",[43] but the uncertainty of tone surely highlights Powell's own attitude.

This implied introversion within the community is exemplified by the locals' suspicion of Bob, who represents the *Other*, until he demonstrates that he speaks the same language when talking about wood (speaking it more fluently than Alison, who shares their nationality). The fact that he is here to help win the war does not count for much in their eyes. Strangeness is indicated by the way in which the people at the town hall are rendered slightly sinister, Alison referred to as "the incident" by the police. Later the blacksmith tries to make fun of her until she wins him over with humour, emphasising how difficult it is for her to be seen as the equal of the locals, especially as a woman. Their treatment differs markedly from that Alison receives when she asks for directions in a devastated Canterbury. The suspicion of other ways of living is summed up by Prudence. She asks to be called Prue as she dislikes Prudence, name and quality. Yet in turning down life in town she had let prudence destroy the possibility of romance, thereby resigning herself to spinsterhood. Her view that urban streets have no character, "with every house a different sort of sadness in it", is one she can only imagine, because she cannot know from first-hand experience. It is a product of prejudice. The townies' willingness to experience country life is not reciprocated.

The incomers, two of them (Alison and Peter) with an urban background, are compared and contrasted with the locals. Alison and Bob in particular exhibit differences and similarities with them: Alison had sold garden equipment in London but has a knowledge of and sympathy with the area; Bob is American but knows about wood. Peter is the only one who does not have a direct connection to rural pursuits, and is most resistant to Colpeper's message until put back in

[43] Moor, 2005, p.108. Moor appears to shift his position in the course of his long chapter, and later says that "a rupture between the urban and the rural is diagnosed, and the narrative is driven by the need to resuture the wound": Moor, 2005, p.110.

touch with his neglected love of church music.[44] Alison and Peter are presented as having been in occupations that they would not have chosen for themselves and which are portrayed as ersatz versions of more authentic ways of living: selling garden furniture is the decadent relative of a knowledge of wood and the wheelwright's craft; Peter's good living as a cinema organist is unfavourably compared to playing a cathedral organ (and there is a sense that his normal peacetime way of spending a Sunday afternoon –cards with the boys – is poor nourishment for the soul). Yet they live comfortable lives that may be unbalanced, but are not bad. Exactly why knowing when to cut down a tree should be spiritually superior to selling the finished product is never spelled out, nor why a particular branch of secular musicianship should entail prostituting one's talents.

At least the interlopers bring energy and a desire to solve the problem that has eluded the local authorities. The police sergeant is complacent about the Glueman, perhaps colluding in illegal acts that help to maintain public order. When Duckett is asked by Bob what kind of place Chillingbourne is, he replies that it is the kind of place where people sleep at night. No wonder, when the sole entertainment is Colpeper's Saturday-night lecture. Christie argues that the "desultory efforts by the servicemen stationed locally to unmask the Glueman" (Alison is after all the eleventh victim) is a structuring framework, and it does provide the subsequent narrative thrust.[45] But the fact that the trio solve the riddle so easily suggests that rural living can induce slow-wittedness. The constable himself is evidence that, far from being "G-Men" as he readily acknowledges, he and his colleagues barely qualify as policemen. Fuller claims that they are "flummoxed" on hearing of the attack on Alison, but lethargic would be a more apt description.[46]

[44] Pugh, 2009, p.98, includes Peter along with Alison and Bob "succumbing" to Chillingbourne's "pastoral charms", but it is Canterbury's cathedral which has the greater influence on him. He clearly enjoys his country stroll with Bob, but is happy to run back down the hill.
[45] Ian Christie, *Arrows of Desire*, Faber and Faber, London, 1994, p.49. There seems to have been little effort by the residents of Chillingbourne Camp to unmask the Glueman either, despite the havoc wreaked on their social lives.
[46] Fuller, 1995, p.34.

It is not surprising that, bent on exposing Colpeper, Peter should want to go to Canterbury to speak to the police there.

Alison, Peter and Bob receive their blessings, but at the end of the film, while they have been enriched by their weekend in the country, Bob and Peter are ready to move on, just as Powell himself had no compulsion to make his living from the land. A road after all goes in two directions, and as Belloc points out, the Old Road had commercial as well as religious significance.[47] There is no evidence that Peter, should he survive another year of war, would throw up his well-paid job to become a church organist, or Alison decide to live in the country full-time. The message seems to be that we should be aware of where we came from, and our connectedness to the past, indeed these are things worth fighting for, but this awareness is something one carries, wherever one happens to be.

The denizens of Canterbury, who have been unable to sleep soundly under a threat that those in the soundly-sleeping Chillingbourne area do not face, show their pluck by cheerfulness and resolve in the face of destruction, as indicated by the notices adorning the bomb sites. The arc of the film is from the darkness of the arrival at Chillingbourne (the night scenes well served by Erwin Hillier's noirish cinematography) to the light and space of Canterbury Cathedral – that is, from the narrow views, with little illumination, of the country folk, to the knowledge and life embodied in the urban surroundings at their journey's end. "The plot, such as it is," says William Whitebait, "points to the Cathedral"[48], and Tim Cawkwell sees the cathedral as a fifth presence, alongside the four main characters.[49] Canterbury, complete with its cultural

[47] Belloc, 1935, p.421.
[48] Whitebait, 1944.
[49] Cawkwell, 2008, p.371; "all roads lead to the cathedral" (p.372). I would take issue with his characterisation of the cathedral "embedded in town and countryside", even if the country is close by.

associations, is an environment tested by the strains of war in ways that the countryside could never be. After all, this is a *Canterbury*, not a *Chillingbourne*, tale.

Stella Hockenhull begins her account of the film by describing Alison wandering through the countryside, seemingly oblivious to its beauty.[50] Alison suddenly starts and stares into the distance, the camera cuts to a view of the cathedral then back to her. It is clear from the change to her features that she is having a spiritual experience, underlined by singing, mediaeval music, the jingling of horses' harness and laughter on the soundtrack all of which, as Colpeper tells her moments later (having popped up in a puckish moment), come from within. Hockenhull states that her experience is motivated by the landscape, but the landscape meant little in spiritual terms as Alison walked through it. It is the cathedral which supplies the spiritual experience, not a country walk on a Sunday afternoon. Alison complains about large towns in her conversation with Colpeper, but this is a matter of scale, Canterbury's small size and relative gentility allowing it to retain an atmosphere and character lost in larger, more faceless cities. This is not a city experiencing the urban squalor shown in *Housing Problems* (Arthur Elton, Edgar Anstey, 1935).

The message though is equivocal, so perhaps the emblematic shots of the film are the hawk turning into a Spitfire, linking past and present, and the cathedral seen in the distance, urban and rural in harmony. Moor considers the film to present an "Edenic countryside", standing in for the entire nation as "'quintessentially' English", but this verdict ignores Canterbury completely, and extrapolates unduly from what for Peter and Bob is a pleasant but temporary diversion from

[50] Stella Hockenhull, *Neo-Romantic Landscapes: An Aesthetic Approach to the Films of Powell and Pressburger*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle Upon Tyne, 2008, p.1. Her concern, as her title indicates, is to locate Powell and Pressburger within the British Neo-romanticism of the period. As has hopefully been demonstrated here, that is not the full picture.

more pressing concerns.[51] The emphasis by critics on mysticism and the pastoral does Powell and Pressburger a disservice by simplifying the complex vision expressed in their film. They value the countryside certainly, but the town as well; the past and the roots of Englishness, but also the uncertain future. *A Canterbury Tale* is less about where we have come from than it is about what we should aspire to be.

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October 2011

[51] Moor, 2005, p.88. He refers to Canterbury as "magical" (p.94), and puzzlingly, its cathedral as a "rural variant" of St Paul's Cathedral's symbolic value in the war effort (p.95). Similarly Pugh, 2009, p.110, refers to "Canterbury Cathedral and its symbolic valence as English pastoralism", ignoring its urban context.